

'Hope' arrives in Joliet for ex-cons

BY BRIAN STANLEY Joliet Times-Herald July 22, 2013 10:36PM

JOLIET — As the fourth-most populous county in the state, Will County also has one of the largest numbers of ex-convicts.

But according to the Illinois Department of Corrections, last week marked the first time the region hosted a resource fair where government bureaus and community organizations offered their services to help those on parole re-enter society.

More than 500 parolees and people on probation attended the Summit of Hope, which was sponsored by state Sen. Pat McGuire, D-Joliet, and state Rep. Larry Walsh Jr., D-Elwood. The event was organized through IDOC and the Department of Public Health.

Since attendance was mandatory, security was tight as those who received letters to attend entered the Salvation Army on Richards Street. After parolees were searched and their identities were verified, they were given a questionnaire to determine their needs.

"What's going to help them the most? Are they caring for children? Do they have difficulty obtaining food or rent? This is how we'll direct them," IDOC Assistant Director Gladys Taylor said Friday.

Volunteers wearing red "Summit of Hope" shirts then were assigned to work with each parolee on a one-on-one basis.

Information about topics such as HIV awareness, substance abuse, schools and career counseling was available at different booths set up in the gymnasium.

"For a long time, the focus (of parole) was law enforcement. 'If they screw up, lock them up,' " Deputy Chief of Parole Arthur Sutton said. "In the last few years we've started to place more emphasis on reintegration back into the community."

A big step to start that process is having an I.D. issued by the Secretary of State's office. The Men and Women's League donated the \$20 fees for the state I.D.'s issued.

Inmates who want to start being rehabilitated can apply for birth certificates and social security cards, though many don't until they are released.

“You have to have that for access to housing. You need that for job readiness. We want people to go back to school, and they need I.D.,” Taylor said.

Secretary of State employees also were able to check on whether someone was eligible for a new driver’s license or what fees needed to be paid to get one.

“If you have a sparse resume (because of being incarcerated), putting on that you have a valid license is a good addition,” Intergovernmental Deputy Director Ellen Meyers said.

Organizers hope the Summit of Hope will be held locally on a regular basis.

Salvation Army Director Tycee Bell said the expo demonstrates that everyone in the community is a part of the process.

“There’s a lot of nervousness when someone is directed to be here. But the resources are here to help them and help everybody,” she said.